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Soldier on the Spot

U.S. General Is Playing Crucial Role in Setting Central America Policy

Army's Paul Gorman Keeps Strong Military Presence Via 'Training Exercises'

Is It a 'Backdoor' Buildup?

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Over coffee and cigars after dinner one night in Honduras, Gen. Paul Gorman, the commander of U.S. forces in Central America, told a group of visiting senators how he had prevented war in the region.

A year ago, he recalled, Nicaragua's Sandinista government was massing troops and tanks on the Honduran border. Fearing an imminent invasion, Gen. Gorman quickly persuaded the Pentagon to send thousands of American troops for a joint training exercise with the Honduran army. The move was designed to deter Nicaraguan aggression.

"I'm convinced we averted war down there," Gen. Gorman told the senators. "If we hadn't intervened, we would have seen Sandinista action."

Since taking over the Southern Command in May 1983, the 56-year-old general has played a major role in planning and executing a Reagan administration policy that emphasizes military solutions to the region's problems. Serving a president who is inclined to follow the advice of his top brass, Gen. Gorman has been able, through close attention to detail and an abundant supply of ideas, to translate the administration's broad goals into specific operational plans.

Gen. Paul Gorman

Gen. Gorman, a staunch anti-Communist who earned combat medals in Korea and Vietnam, believes that the Central American conflict is a struggle between East and West that can't be won without the threat of force and a strong show of support for U.S. allies.

So deeply does he believe this that he has little patience for those who can't see the Communist threat in the same terms. Earlier this year, Gen. Gorman lashed out at Mexico, a critic of U.S. military involvement in Central America. Mexico, he told a congressional committee, "has pursued a policy of accommodation" with "international leftist influences" and "is now becoming a center for subversion throughout Central America." The remark sparked a diplomatic furor and a quick apology from the administration.

Expanding Influence

To expand U.S. military influence in Central America, Gen. Gorman has skillfully used a series of training exercises to maintain a nearly constant U.S. military presence there. He has presided over construction of a burgeoning network of military facilities in Honduras, including a half-dozen airfields, radar stations, tank traps and plans for storage bunkers for bombs and rockets. (Congress's General Accounting Office has found that the Defense Department improperly used military-exercise funds to train Honduran troops and may have violated the law in building base camps in Honduras.) The general also has worked to build regional military alliances.

Sen. James Sasser, who toured the region last winter, contends that Gen. Gorman has engineered "a backdoor military buildup . . . which far exceeds what is necessary for the successful completion of military exercises." The Tennessee Democrat adds that the facilities "make war easier to conduct."

Other members of Congress liken the situation in Central America to their recollections of Vietnam two decades ago; they fear that the U.S. is again sliding toward direct military involvement. Administration officials deny this and contend that Secretary of State George Shultz's recent surprise trip to Managua shows their interest in regional negotiations.

Important Lesson

But in at least one respect, the comparison with Vietnam probably is appropriate. "Gorman learned an important lesson in Vietnam," says Robert Komer, an influential civilian official in Vietnam and later a deputy secretary of defense in the Carter administration. "He learned that a much more aggressive advisory and support role might have forestalled the need for U.S. troop involvement."

After the war, Gen. Gorman had a lot of time to study U.S. mistakes in Vietnam. He was a major contributor to the Pentagon Papers, the government's detailed history of the Southeast Asian conflict, and wrote many of the sections sharply critical of U.S. decisions and actions.

In Vietnam, Gen. Gorman earned a reputation as a tough commander who pushed his troops hard. Retired Lt. Gen. Sidney Berry remembers that in 1966 Gen. Gorman spent his birthday—Aug. 25—riding into a fierce battle on the back of a tank. From the ground, he directed an air strike of napalm bombs that landed so close they burned the map he was holding and singed his forehead.

"He expects people working around him to have a sense of urgency," Gen. Berry says.

Gen. Gorman's supporters praise him as the perfect choice to lead the once-sleepy Southern Command, which—to signal its growing importance—was upgraded to a four-star post when he arrived. A battle-tested, tough-talking soldier, he also has political connections that allow him to influence policy and outmaneuver U.S. ambassadors in the region.

When Gen. Gorman arrived at the Southern Command's headquarters in Panama last year, he brought along detailed knowledge of Central America and of President Reagan's desire to halt Communist gains in the region. In his previous assignment as assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Gorman regularly attended meetings and worked closely with White House and National Security Council officials who focus on the region. He also has spent a year in Washington working at the Central Intelligence Agency, an active participant in Central American policy.

Early in the administration, there were deep divisions between the hard-liners, who believe in exerting military pressure on the Sandinistas, and some top State Department officials, who placed more emphasis on trying to negotiate. Currently, the hard-liners, including Constantine Menges of the National Security Council and Fred Ikle and Nestor Sanchez of the Defense Department, have the predominant influence—and Gen. Gorman shares their views.

Critics such as Sen. Sasser warn that the U.S. is "Americanizing" the struggle in Central America in a way that parallels actions taken two decades ago in Thailand. Then, these critics note, military officers believed that Thailand offered a secure base from which to support operations against Communist guerrillas in Southeast Asia, just as the U.S. is using Honduras in Central America today.

Even within the Pentagon, there is some uneasiness over Gen. Gorman's apparent willingness to increase American presence in the region. Pentagon officials say they recently rejected a Gorman suggestion that the U.S. prepare for the possible use of unmarked AC-130 Spectre gunships flown by CIA personnel to patrol the skies over El Salvador if leftists gained a decisive edge on the ground.

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